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How to Trust Electronic Voting

Electronic voting machines that do not produce a paper record of every vote cast cannot be trusted. In 2008, more than one-third of the states, including New Jersey and Texas, still did not require all votes to be recorded on paper. Representative Rush Holt has introduced a good bill that would ban paperless electronic voting in all federal elections. Congress should pass it while there is still time to get ready for 2010.

In paperless electronic voting, voters mark their choices, and when the votes have all been cast, the machine spits out the results. There is no way to be sure that a glitch or intentional vote theft — by malicious software or computer hacking — did not change the outcome. If there is a close election, there is also no way of conducting a meaningful recount.

Mr. Holt's bill would require paper ballots to be used for every vote cast in November 2010. It would help prod election officials toward the best of the currently available technologies: optical-scan voting. With optical scans, voters fill out a paper ballot that is then read by computer — much like a standardized test. The votes are counted quickly and efficiently by computer, but the paper ballot remains the official vote, which can then be recounted by hand.

The bill would also require the states to conduct random hand recounts of paper ballots in 3 percent of the precincts in federal elections, and more in very close races. These routine audits are an important check on the accuracy of the computer count.

The bill has several provisions designed to ease the transition for cash-strapped local governments. It authorizes $1 billion in financing to replace non-complying voting systems, and more money to pay for the audits. It also allows states extra time to phase out A.T.M.-style machines, in which voters make their choices on a computer screen and the machine produces a paper record — like a receipt — of the vote.

Such machines are more reliable than paperless voting. But they are still not ideal, since voters do not always check the paper record to be sure it is accurate. By 2014, machines that produce paper trails would have to be replaced by ones in which voters directly record their votes on paper — the best system of all.

The House leadership should make passing Mr. Holt's bill a priority. Few issues matter as much as ensuring that election results can be trusted.